



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Frederic Edwin Church and the Splendour of Small-Scale Landscapes

by Elaine Adams

FREDERIC EDWIN CHURCH (1826–1900) was one of the most prominent American landscape painters of the nineteenth century. A prolific and successful artist, Church is chiefly remembered for his large-scale epic scenes of the Hudson River Valley and South America that continue to captivate audiences, influence artists and receive great critical acclaim. However, it is in his small-scale preparatory works that he reveals his technical virtuosity, emotional sensitivity and intimacy with his subjects.

Born in Hartford, Connecticut, Frederic Church was the only son of **Joseph and Eliza Janes Church**, descendants of Puritan ancestors who landed in America on the Mayflower. Their impeccable genealogy granted the Churches a prominent position in New England's social and business set. Joseph's impressive entrepreneurial

status included manufacturer of jewellery and silverware, director of **Connecticut River Banking Company**, director of **Aetna Insurance Company**, and president of **Mechanics Society of Hartford**. Frederic's grandfather, **Samuel Church**, built the first paper mill in Lee, Massachusetts, which later became the **Hurlbut Paper Company**. It was expected that Frederic would continue his paternal course as a successful industrialist. However, his artistic maternal uncle, **Adrian Janes**, a designer and manufacturer of wallpaper, as well as an oil painter, may have influenced Frederic towards more aesthetic aspirations.

In 1842, at the age of sixteen, Frederic began studying drawing and painting with local artists, **Benjamin H. Coe (1799–1883)** and **Alexander Hamilton Emmons (1816–1884)**. His natural ability as a draughtsman and colourist was



Frederic Edwin Church, c. 1860
Carte-de-Visite E&HT Anthony
Paper 3 4/5" × 2 2/5"
Collection of Olana Historic Site



Horseshoe Falls, Niagara, 1856–57
Oil on two pieces of paper, mounted on canvas 11 1/2" × 35 5/8"
Collection: Olana Historic Site



immediately evident, and his sisters, **Elizabeth** and **Charlotte**, heartily encouraged Frederic to pursue his passion. Initially, their father was not supportive, but after coming to terms with the inevitable, he decided to invest in his son's career by hiring the best art teacher available.

In 1844 Frederic's father asked his friend, **Daniel Wadsworth** (1771–1848), a prominent arts patron and founder of the **Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art**, to write a letter to the renowned Hudson River artist, **Thomas Cole** (1801–1848), requesting that Frederic study with him. With Wadsworth's referral, Cole accepted the eighteen-year old Frederic Church as his first pupil.

Frederic was overjoyed with the news that he would soon be studying with the great Thomas Cole. In a letter he wrote to Cole, Church expressed his enthusiasm to paint *en plein air* with the master:

...I have seldom felt more sincere joy than I experienced when I learned your favourable answer....My highest ambition lies in excelling in the art. I pursue it not as a source of gain or merely as an amusement. I trust I have higher aims than these....

it would give me the greatest pleasure to accompany you in your rambles about the place, observing nature in all her various appearances. I have never before this spring attempted to paint from nature....

Thomas Cole's interest in painting directly from nature (*en plein air*), was inspired by the European landscape masters, **Claude Lorrain** (1600–1682) and **John Constable** (1776–1837). Although mid-seventeenth century Europe considered landscape paintings inferior art subjects, mid-nineteenth-century America found it an exhilarating concept.

Perceptions about the land were changing as America was experiencing the providential call for Manifest Destiny and the colonization of the coastal and frontier lands. Settlements began advancing further west, and the public's once adverse sentiment towards the vast unknown was replaced with a nostalgia for the great expanse of wilderness and spectacular vistas. Moreover, Cole was philosophically inspired by the contemporaneous naturalist writers **Henry David Thoreau** (1817–1862) and **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803–1882),

whose essays and poems championed the idea that nature and man could co-exist in peaceful harmony.

Cole and his followers, **Asher B. Durand** (1796–1886), **Sanford Robinson Gifford** (1823–1880), and **John Frederick Kensett** (1816–1872), depicted romantic, idealized scenes of the Hudson River Valley and its surroundings, as well as the Catskill Mountains, Adirondack Mountains, and the White Mountains of New Hampshire. These paintings reflect three basic themes: discovery, exploration and settlement. In general, Hudson River School artists believed that nature, in the form of the American landscape, was an ineffable manifestation of God. Cole became so associated with the movement that he was posthumously named the father of the *Hudson River School*.

AS A STUDENT, FEDERIC Church was immersed in Cole's artistic philosophy. He even moved to Cole's house in the Catskill Mountains where he studied diligently for two years, including developing his knowledge of botany and geology. Church learned quickly from Cole, and in 1845 his work was shown for the first time in the **National Academy of Design's** annual exhibition. The following year, he sold his first major work to the Wadsworth Athenaeum, and by 1848 Church was elected a full member of the National Academy of Design, becoming the youngest artist in the twenty-year history of the prestigious institution that was co-founded by Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand. Also in 1848, Church established his own studio in New York City, first at the **Art Union Building**, then, three years later, at the famous **10th Street Studio Building**, home to the leading artists of the day.

Church was accustomed to trav-



Study for *Heart of the Andes*, 1858
Oil on canvas 10 1/4" × 18 1/4"
Olana Historical Site



Chimborazo, 1864

Oil on canvas 48" × 84"

Collection: The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens
Gift of the Virginia Steele Scott Foundation

elling from spring through autumn and sketching his observations typically in formats of 12 by 16 inches and on a variety of surfaces, including panel, canvas, and paper. In the winter, he used these small-scale references to paint his larger canvases in his studio. From 1852 through 1856, he visited South America, Nova Scotia, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and made several sketching trips to Niagara Falls. In July of 1856, while in Niagara, Church spent some time with the family of **Jonathan Sturges**. One of the daughters, **Amelia Sturges**, provided a glimpse into the artist's enthusiasm for plein air painting in a letter she wrote to her mother:

Our cottage is now decorated by a charming sketch of Niagara from Mr. Church's brush. He is intoxicated with Niagara. He rises at sunrise and we only see him at meal times. He is so restless away from the Falls that he cannot keep still, always feeling as if he were losing some new effect of light.

Church used his sketches of Niagara Falls from his 1856 trip to

paint his heroic 3 1/2 by 7 1/2 foot work, *Niagara* (1857, Corcoran Gallery of Art). One of the preliminary oil studies Church displayed in his studio, *Horseshoe Falls, Niagara* (1856–1857, Olana Historic Site), is painted on two pieces of joined paper and measures 11 1/2 by 35 5/8 inches. The small work prompted great impact and inspired the art magazine, *The Crayon*, to write:

Mr Church...exhibits a sketch of Niagara Falls, which more fully renders the 'might and majesty' of this difficult subject than we ever remember to have seen these characteristics of it on canvas. The point of view is happily chosen, and its impressiveness seems to be produced by admirable drawing aided by a skilful subordination of accessories; the eye is not diverted, led away, as it were, from the soul of the scene by diffuse representation of surrounding features.

Church was a member of the elite New York gentleman's supper club known as *The Travellers*. Among the membership was author

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Sunrise (aka *The Rising Sun*), 1862
Oil on canvas 10 1/2" × 17 15/16"
Collection: Olana Historic Site

Bayard Taylor (1825–1878) who while on a trip to Berlin in 1856 met with the famous Prussian naturalist and explorer **Baron Alexander von Humboldt** (1769–1859). Humboldt's earlier explorations through South America (1799–1804) and his extensive descriptions of his journey from a scientific point of view continued to intrigue the public's imagination. Taylor's published essay based on his discussions with Humboldt inspired Church to return to Ecuador in 1857 for a second trip to create further detailed sketches.

IN GATHERING unusual visual data for his paintings that would not only intrigue the artist, but would thrill his audience, Church travelled to extraordinary and extreme locations. Later, his sketches and notes would be used to re-create grand opuses from the comfort of his studio. His immediate, small-scale paintings continue to serve as a testament to his ability as an artist and to his scientific knowledge in geology and atmospheric effects.

For the next decade, Church devoted a great part of his attention to South American subjects, producing a celebrated series that became the basis of his ensuing international fame. As Church's reputation and confidence began to grow, so did the size of his can-

vases. His most ambitious, complex, and largest tropical scene, *Heart of the Andes* (1859, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), which measures nearly 6 by 10 feet, guaranteed the young Frederic Church success as one of America's most famous painters.

Upon seeing *Heart of the Andes* in Saint Louis during its national tour, twenty-four-year-old **Samuel Clemens** (Mark Twain) wrote to his brother **Orion**:

I have just returned from a visit to the most wonderfully beautiful painting which this city has ever seen—Church's "Heart of the Andes." ...I have seen it several times, but it is always a new picture—totally new—you seem to see nothing the second time which you saw the first. We took the opera glass, and examined its beauties minutely...

During the first three weeks of May in 1859 twelve-thousand people paid admission to see Church's acclaimed painting while it was still in New York, before it embarked on a two-year tour of Britain and eight other American cities. Perhaps the highlight of Church's success while touring *The Heart of the Andes* came when he met **Isabel Carnes** of Dayton, Ohio, his future wife. Their chance encounter was the talk of the art world and is described in the memoirs of Church's friend, artist **Worthington Whittredge** (1820–1910):

Church was very fond of standing behind some of the rich draperies he had arranged around his picture, and if not listening to what people said about his picture, at least watching

from his vantage ground the faces of those who came to see it. Of course, it was intimated that he was fond of looking at the pretty girls.... It happened that one day...he saw in the distance a ravishing vision [Isabel]...

The couple married in 1860. On the eve of their wedding, the thirty-four-year-old Church purchased **Wynson Breezy Farm**, a 126-acre property perched on a hilltop overlooking the Hudson River. Twenty years later the farm would be renamed *Olana*—the name Frederic and Isabel gave their home in reference to an ancient Persian "fortress treasure-house."

Church painted small-scale works to express his deepest emotions. In exaltation of his bride, and in appreciation of her spiritual significance in his life, Church painted a 19 1/4 by 14 1/4 inch canvas titled *The Star in the East* (1860, Olana Historic Site). To celebrate the birth of their first child, **Herbert Edwin**, in 1862, Church painted the 10 1/2 by 17 15/16 inch canvas, *Sunrise* (Olana Historic Site).

In 1862 Church began a major work based on his numerous studies done from his two earlier Ecuadorian trips (1852 and 1857) to be titled *Chimborazo* (1864, Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, Virginia Steele Scott Collection). Along with *Heart of the Andes* and *Cotopaxi* (1862 Detroit Institute of Arts), *Chimborazo* was to complete his *Andean Trilogy*.

According to **Jessica Todd Smith**, the **Virginia Steele Scott Curator of American Art at The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens** in San Marino, California, "In painting *Chimborazo*, Church drew his inspiration from Humboldt who regarded the strato-volcano as '...the grandest moun-



tain in the world' and likened it to Michelangelo's dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome; an analogy with a religious connotation that Church would have appreciated. Chimborazo's great height of 20,561 feet and location near the equator result in an extraordinary level of biodiversity within a relatively small geographic area. Church sketched the mountain from various vantage points, ultimately selecting a view that was recommended by Humboldt, that is, from below and ascending visually through the three ecosystems, from the torrid rain forest, to the temperate grasslands, to the frigid snow-clad peak."

IN 1864, AT THE BIRTH OF their second child, **Emma Frances**, Church painted another celebratory small oil painting, *Moonrise* (Olana Historic Site), measuring 10 by 17 inches. Sadly, in 1865 both children, Herbert and Emma, died of diphtheria. The Churches never completely recovered from their loss. Shortly thereafter, Frederic and Isabel made a recuperative trip to Jamaica. Then, in 1866, they had another son, **Frederic Joseph**. The following year, the family launched an eighteen-

month journey to Europe, North Africa, the Near East, and Greece. In 1869, while in Rome, **Theodore Winthrop** was born. In 1870 their third son **Louis Palmer** was born, and the following year their daughter **Isabel Charlotte** was born.

In the 1870s Frederic Church developed severe rheumatism in his right arm, which hindered his work on major pictures for the remainder of his thirty years. Furthermore, *Olana* and its surrounding property that had doubled in size to 250 acres, absorbed much of his creative time. Referred by Church as "the Centre of the World," *Olana* became his private refuge and a source of inspiration from which he painted brilliant sunsets and panoramic views of his beloved Hudson River, the Catskill Mountains and the Taconic Hills. Some of these sketches rank among the finest of the artist's repertoire. In a letter Frederic Church wrote to his friend and fellow artist Martin J. Heade, he describes his inspiration from *Olana*:

We are having splendid meteoric displays—magnificent sunsets and auroras—red, green, yellow, blue—and in such profusion I have actually been drawn away from my usual steady devotion

to [building] the new house to sketch some of the fine things hung in the sky.

Olana became Frederic Church's private museum, in which he orchestrated his personal collection to carefully reflect his experiences, interests, travels and aesthetic taste. While he sold most of his large-scale, finished paintings, Church adorned *Olana* with some of his most vivid oil sketches of natural phenomena and studies that were used for several of his major works. It is in this collection of smaller works that we can appreciate Frederic Church's spontaneity, enthusiasm and the magic of nature's splendours.

Notes:

For scholarly contributions to this article, we wish to express our appreciation to Jessica Todd Smith, the Virginia Steele Scott Curator of American Art at The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, where Church's painting, Chimborazo, is on permanent view. Additional research sources include Frederic Church by John K. Howat, published by Yale University Press, 2005; and Thomas Cole by Earl A. Powell, published by Harry H. Abrams, 1990.



Olana, southwest façade
Photo by Stan Ries



Study for Twilight in the Wilderness, 1858
Oil on canvas 8 1/4" x 12 1/4"
Olana Historic Site